

What Literature Can Do

Performing Affect in Zoë Wicomb's *October*

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Abstract

Our affective response to works of literature, Derek Attridge argues in "Once more with feeling: art, affect and performance" (2011), is not "some mental simulacrum of affect, but a real feeling" (330) that replicates remembered experiences in the extra-literary domain. While reading, we feel these emotions "always *as performances of language's powers*" (334) as we perform the literary work, bringing to life as events the "individual's mental processes" – "the emotions, the mental and physical events, the apprehendings of the external world it depicts" (58). The affective response Zoë Wicomb's *October* (2014) elicits in the reader, I argue in this essay, is also staged in the novel: like Mercia, who returns again and again to Marilynne Robinson's *Home*, a novel she finds "Strangely familiar" (12), to reflect on ideas of home, her own conflicted relationship with her past in South Africa, and her present deracinated existence in Scotland, the reader of *October* feels the performative power of language in a novel that affectively unsettles complacent understandings of memory and belonging.

Keywords affect, performativity, Derek Attridge, Zoë Wicomb, literary reading as event

Zoë Wicomb's *October* (2014) undoes me as a reader. Each reading of this narrative of Mercia Murray – a coloured academic who visits her native South Africa after being left by her Scottish boyfriend only to be confronted with a family secret – takes an inordinate amount of time, as I intermittently find myself staring off into space, lost in memory. The act of reading becomes one of remembering, which also means that my affective response to events within the novel are conflated with the feelings evoked by this nostalgia. But what exactly am I remembering? After all, I am reading across a considerable cultural distance and while both Mercia and I are academics, South African, and immigrants, I am not from her hometown, Kliprand, these are not my family members, and this is not their story. Of course, this is not anyone's story, as these characters, in this incarnation, exist only on the page, variously brought to life by different readers and readings, and Mercia's tortured negotiation of notions of home and belonging are performed emotions. My affective response, however, as Derek Attridge argues in "Once more with feeling: art, affect and performance" (2011, 330) is not just "some mental simulacrum of affect, but a real feeling" that replicates experiences in the extra-literary domain. While this suggests that my response to this work is singular, influenced by my unique idioculture, it is not purely subjective. As Attridge (2015, 33) points out, "I belong to a group whose members share a great many of my own mental and emotional habits and norms" that, to a certain extent, determine my reading practices. Significantly, however, reading *October*, I am feeling these emotions "always as performances of language's powers" (Attridge 2011, 334), demonstrating literature's capacity to engage with the complex, intertwined nature of memory and affect. The emotional remembering the reader experiences, accessing her own memories while being performed by the text, is also staged (that is, performed) in the novel: on a bus ride from Glasgow to Edinburgh, Mercia overhears a mother consoling her son after he throws up; the mother's soothing "Sweetheart, my sweetheart" does nothing to appease the boy's conviction that "he had ruined everything." Mercia's own stomach heaves as "she lurch[s] into the past, once more a child groping for her mother's skirt, sobbing her sorrys and her incomprehension" (Wicomb 2014, 109). In this remembered event, however, she receives no maternal comfort, but only punishment for accidentally dropping a cup onto

a cement floor where it smashes into pieces. This echo reverberates later in the novel when, taking her alcoholic brother, Jake, to a rehabilitation centre, she soothes him with the words, “Sweetheart, my poor sweetheart” and is “alarmed to hear in her own voice that of the woman on the bus ride to Edinburgh” (Wicomb 2014, 184).

This article, then, examines the affective reading experienced in this encounter with *October* through the lens of Derek Attridge’s influential notion of literary reading as an event, elucidated in a series of publications: *The Singularity of Literature* (2004); “Once more with feeling: art, affect and performance” (2011); and *The Work of Literature* (2015). For Attridge, the meaning of the work of literature should be seen as “a verb rather than as a noun: not something carried away when we have finished reading it, but something that happens as we read or recall it. And that happening occurs only because the language is shaped and organized, an active shaping and organizing that we re-live as we experience the literariness of the work” (Attridge 2005a, 9). The text’s linguistic performance of the reader constitutes the *work* of literature. Thus, for reading to be experienced as an *event*, which in Attridge’s use of the term also means an encounter with alterity, form and content should be considered together; put differently, the form also has content. In *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) he writes, “The new form that emerges, the new arrangement of cultural materials, is, by the same token, a new content – an open set of fresh possibilities of meaning, feeling, perceiving, responding, behaving,” with all the words in this list “understood as verbs, not as nouns” (108). The affective reading *October* elicits, as registered above, is the event that unsettles the reader’s complacent understanding of the relationship between memory and place as a site of belonging.

In Mercia Murray’s engagement with Marilynne Robinson’s novel, *Home* – from which *October* takes one of its epigraphs – Wicomb’s novel also renders visible the nature of literary reading. When the reader performs the literary work, Attridge claims, she brings to life as events the “individual’s mental processes” – “the emotions, the mental and physical events, the apprehendings of the external world” (Attridge 2015, 58) – staged by the novelist. Mercia returns again and again to a novel she finds “Strangely familiar” (Wicomb 2014, 12) to reflect on ideas of home and her conflicted relationship with the past she thought she left behind in South Af-

rica. Called to Kliprand by her brother's letter asking her without explanation to take care of his son, tired of waiting for him to emerge from his room and his alcoholic stupor, and trying fruitlessly to work on her memoir, Mercia longs for the inspiration of this novel, which she had read before her return. "These days her memory is not what it was," the narrator tells us. "[A]lready she could do with re-reading the story she remembers as a version of theirs, echoed in another continent. Give or take a few transpositions, the different worlds are not so different, in spite of the genteel northern setting." "[H]aving then settled into identification with the story, the characters – a child with a dressing-up box – [Mercia] wonders what it would be like reading the novel now, at home, where she grapples with being back" (Wicomb 2014, 143).

Her use of the paradoxical phrase, "strangely familiar," and the metaphor, "a child with a dressing-up box," suggests a potentially *hospitable* reading, a literary experience through which otherness can enter into her existing idiocultural framing of notions of belonging. Of course, this alterity is "not just anything ... hitherto unencountered; it's that which is *unencounterable*, given the present state of the encountering mind or culture, what [Emmanuel] Levinas calls the 'same'" (Attridge 2015, 55). It is significant, then, that *October* finds Mercia seemingly in the midst of an existential crisis brought on by two major events: the first is announced in the opening lines of the novel as an affirmation of identity in the declarative sentence that forms the entire first paragraph: "Mercia Murray is a woman of fifty-two years who has been left" (Wicomb 2014, 1). After many years together, her former boyfriend Craig is expecting a child with another woman. The second is the revelation of her father's paedophilic relationship with Sylvie, the woman who now is her sister-in-law (revealed only towards the end of the novel). Up till this point, these men have acted as fulcrums for Mercia's ostensibly rooted understanding of belonging: she describes her continued residency in Scotland as the result of being "enthralled" (Wicomb 2014, 144) – held in place – by Craig; in South Africa, being raised to not belong to the coloured community by her father, Nicholas Theophilus Murray, who teaches his children to speak English, her sense of belonging is nevertheless anchored in the idea that she is the daughter of a good man. In fact, this phrase, "a good man" (Wicomb 2014, 9) to describe him is repeated so often in the

narrative as to foreshadow its emptying out of meaning once the family secret is exposed; in light of its revelation, Mercia vows that she “will not be destroyed” by her father (Wicomb 2014, 198), as she will not “destroy herself” (Wicomb 2014, 201) by probing the reasons for Craig’s desertion too deeply.

It is in the resulting state of existential vertigo that Mercia is forced into a re-evaluation of her understanding of home as related to place. Again we are reminded of *October*’s epigraphs taken from novels entitled *Home* – Robinson’s, as mentioned, and that of Toni Morrison. Wicomb has revealed in an interview that her publishers thwarted her desire to give the same title to this work (*Sunday Times* 2015). As such, she is returning to familiar concerns; as various scholars such as Attridge (2005b), Minesh Dass (2011), and Antoinette Pretorius (2015) have noted, her work is characterized by a sense of displacement, and characters who, like Wicomb herself, straddle different cultures are often depicted as having the sense of being simultaneously at home and un-homed. Perhaps because Mercia, in *October*, is a literary critic, an academic working on post-colonial memory who prides herself on her rigour in close reading, or due to her abhorrence of the memoir form rendering the private public, she seems unable confront this topic directly, rather mediating her investigation through the reading of Robinson’s portrayal of family relations and homecoming. However, a different way of looking at this, one more pertinent to the argument here, is that Mercia is, in fact, unable to explain herself and make sense of recent events within her current frames of understanding, informed as they are by her knowledge of the “exilic condition” (Wicomb 2014, 67) – Craig teases her about this – and of cultural hybridity. More specifically, she articulates this as having “no language for such an exercise” (Wicomb 2014, 198). Like the “child with a dressing-up box” she invokes, Mercia thus clothes Robinson’s story of a wayward brother, dutiful sister, long-suffering parents, and a family secret in her feelings about her own family and, conversely, tries on the characters’ affective responses to explain her own. In other words, it is her *literary* reading of Robinson’s novel, both familiar and strange, that leads to an apprehension of otherness that provokes her into rethinking her understanding of herself in relation to the places, Glasgow and Kliprand, and the people, her deceased parents and her brother Jake, who ostensibly represent home.

Unsurprisingly, then, “Home” is the file name under which she saves her attempt at memoir on her computer; however, her choice of medium through which to re-examine her family dynamic, a form that “prides itself on fidelity” to the past (Wicomb 2014, 213), raises significant questions about the possibility of representing the singularity of events, as first lived through or experienced, through language, rendered further complex by the vagaries of memory. Trying to summon a memory of her deceased mother, she recalls the baking of birthday cakes for her brother and the accompanying smell of “clove and cinnamon and nutmeg rising from the oven.” She immediately doubts the origin of this recollection: “Is it an actual memory? her own? Or is the smell intertwined with that in the novel [Robinson’s *Home*] she is reading, where the house is filled by the mother with fragrant food?” Remembering the smell’s message in *that* novel – “*this house has a soul that loves us all, no matter what*” – she decides that it is a false memory, concluding that “if she can’t distinguish between her own history and someone else’s fiction” (Wicomb 2014, 17), she should abandon this project.

Ideas about the limitations of memory and the role of narrative in recounting the past are, of course, familiar and well-rehearsed, but it is worth standing still on Mercia’s conundrum and the text’s apparent shift of focus onto the role of the author and her narrative’s implied, presumed knowledge of characters and events. The demands of the memoir she is attempting to write foreground this problematic relationship between the past and its linguistic representation, historical events and their remembering. *October*’s staging of this relationship between author and character is salient also in Morrison’s novel, its other inter-text. That story of a young man’s journey to rescue his sister after receiving a letter declaring her life in danger is interspersed with his addresses to his interlocutor who also appears to be the author of the novel. In statements such as “*Since you’re set on telling my story, whatever you think and whatever you write down...*” (Morrison 2013, 5), he emphasizes characters’ lack of control over their narratives; at the same time, he undermines the novelist’s ability to capture others’ singular experiences. “*Describe that if you know how,*” he says about the Louisiana heat. “*Trees give up. Turtles cook in their shells*” (Morrison 2013, 41). The uniqueness of the event as experienced by the character can never be the same as that very event either as lived through or as de-

scribed by the author; add the reader (or the listener) to this exchange, and you have yet another incarnation of the event. In Wicomb's novel, character, storyteller, and interlocutor are all present in Mercia's nephew Nicky's anxiety about communicating his newly acquired knowledge about the flower, chinchinchees, to his mother, Sylvie; initially, he is convinced that

Yes, he could easily remember [there is a long spike with a head carrying lots of little starry flowers ... all bunched together, a basket of petals] and he could tell his mamma, explain the chinchinchees to her; she is good at seeing things he talks about, although the smell would be hard; he doesn't suppose she'd get the smell at all. He ... would remember it, even once he got home, but carrying it over to her exactly, that he couldn't be sure of, that he would just have to try. (Wicomb 2014, 38-39)

If reading and writing are thus endless acts of translation, then *October's* staging of these processes as performing only a temporary or even contested totalization suggests an otherness that hovers at the limits of each attempt at ascribing meaning and identity to events and characters. What would Jake make "of being translated into these words"? (Wicomb 2014, 171), Mercia wonders, paralleled in her later musing if the neighbour across the road for whom Craig constructed "an entire life in prize-winning free verse" (Wicomb 2014, 223) would recognize himself in this poetry. Her anguished "what to do, what to do," as the author of memoir, because Jake, "as wayward as he is in real life, won't be pinned down" (Wicomb 2014, 143) suggests that the word I used earlier to describe her existential dilemma – identity – is no longer appropriate. Rather, Mercia's shifting understanding of and dialogue with the characters populating her memoir (and thus life) is more indicative of what Attridge terms, "idioculture," which signals the "continual evolution" of a person's "unique (indeed singular) cluster of attributes, preferences, habits, and knowledges, not all in harmony with one another" (Attridge, 2015, 61).

This point brings me back to the declarative sentences describing Mercia and her father, already cited, that open the novel: she is a woman who has been left; he is a good man. Similarly, we learn that

her brother “Jacques Theophilus Murray is a bad egg” (Wicomb 2014, 3). These assertions of identity are repeated throughout *October* but, in the end, are exposed, as in Marilynne Robinson’s work, as well-rehearsed but dubious roles in the Murrays’ family dynamic: Mercia reveals her guilt about moving abroad and abandoning her family; Jake is the victim of his father’s transgressions; and well, Nicholas Murray is not such a good man after all. But, as staged in *October*, the hospitality towards alterity is more than merely accepting a different, more truthful, account of the other. Mercia’s received narrative of Sylvie, tainted by a trained, entrenched snobbery towards this Afrikaans speaking “girl” who in conversation “shouts as if she were in another room” (Wicomb 2014, 32) and by the shame of Nicholas’s actions, while undermined, is not simply replaced by a newer, more veracious version. Rather, in a black and white photograph, part of Sylvie’s autobiographical project, Mercia comes across a woman whom she “does not know and cannot fathom” (Wicomb 2014, 166). Significantly, Mercia’s encounter with the photograph is presented as a kind of reading:

What is it that the girl knows? There is more than self-reflexivity, something beyond the knowing aesthetics of representing the self. There is knowledge that crosses over from the ghostly world of the photograph, that flicks across eerily into the real, now a flickering shadow across Mercia’s heart. A shadow of fear and awe. Who is this apparition who rises out of the darkness, whose bright, ironic grin haunts the viewer? Who is Sylvie? (Wicomb 2014, 166-167)

Mercia is unnerved by the experience, registering an affective response – “fear and awe” – that results in her relinquishing control over the interpretation or knowledge of the character in the photograph.

This mirrors the reader’s experience of attempting to interpret Mercia’s actions and her development as a protagonist. But perhaps this is the point. While events in Mercia’s life prompt a shift in her idioculture, rethinking the notion of home as belonging in or to a particular place, there is for her “no choosing between the contradictions of longing for and longing to be away from home” (Wicomb

2014, 208). Indeed, she seems always to be elsewhere. Recognizing familiar plants while on holiday in Lanzarote, she is reminded of species from home such as “Euphorbias from Transvaal, quaintly labeled in the old geographic names of the trekkerboer, and the very melkbos from Kliprand” (Wicomb 2014, 208). Yet, while in Kliprand, helping Nicky identify the local flora, she does not remember the “homely Afrikaans” name for the kalkoentjie, but it is the Latin name she looked up many years later that returns unsolicited. Her being in “the thrall of placelessness” (Wicomb 2014, 162) is countered with her fear of being irretrievably lost between continents.

These echoes across continents suggest that, for Mercia, belonging cannot be tied to a specific place. Craig’s exit left her with a hole into which crept a “sly nostalgia,” but the past “cannot be considered without irony” (Wicomb 2014, 171). Unlike the annual salmon run she witnesses at the Pots of Gartness, where she derides the disappointing “circularity of [their] lives,” finding the endless repetition of returning to their spawning ground a “repellent” and “horrible notion of roundness and completion” (Wicomb 2014, 128), Mercia’s is an impossible return. “So layered are the fragrances of the past, so spliced the memories of places,” she realizes, “that nostalgia will have to do without an object” (Wicomb 2014, 171-172). Thus, while the past and place as sites for belonging, like individual identity, are amorphous and continuously shifting, the idea of home remains as a matter of affect, as a structure of feeling, as a desire for belonging. After deciding to sell her apartment and to move abroad – which she actively pursues by attending a job interview on Macau – Mercia is prompted to return to Glasgow after witnessing, in a pond, a young turtle’s behaviour towards an indifferent, older one. The extraordinary passion with which she interprets this scene signals the desire and the failure to be recognized, not as an interpellative reading, but in the singularity of the first-person “I”: “I am here! Please, oh please. It is I! ... Acknowledge me, it is I I I I ... I am here. Acknowledge me. It is I” (Wicomb 2014, 234-235).

I started this essay by recording my own emotionally unsettled reading of Wicomb’s novel, a literary reading, I have argued, that is also staged in the text. It is not insignificant that, throughout, I have drawn on *October*’s epigraphs from Morrison’s and Robison’s novels, both entitled *Home*, as intertextual signposts to Wicomb’s concerns. Epigraphs represent the novelist also as a *reader* and, while

the intentional fallacy cautions us against making claims about the author's aims in writing a novel, *October's* epigraphs suggest that it is Wicomb's own experience of literary reading as an event that inspired a reconsideration of the idea of home as a place of belonging. *October's* last epigraph from Dylan Thomas's "Poem in October," also the source of the novel's title, foreshadows its exploration of the link between memory, narration, and affect: "And the twice told fields of infancy / That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine" (qtd. in Wicomb, 2014). In its performance of the reader and as staged in the text, Wicomb's *October* demonstrates the power of language to affectively alter our understanding of that place we call home.

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